

Book Review

**SOUTH AFRICA'S POST-APARTHEID
MILITARY:
LOST IN TRANSITION AND
TRANSFORMATION**

Lindy Heinecken

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The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) recently celebrated, “25 Years of Defence in Democracy”¹. Professor Lindy Heinecken’s latest book, *South Africa’s post-apartheid military: Lost in transition and transformation*, is therefore a timely work. Published 25 years after South Africa’s first democratic elections and the integration of the country’s disparate armed forces, Heinecken gives a well-researched, fair and comprehensive account of the critical issues that have characterised 25 years of defence in South Africa.

More importantly, South Africa’s 2015 Defence Review states that the South African Defence Force “is in a critical state of decline”². This decline has continued unabated in the five years since. Heinecken writes, “[t]he SANDF is without a doubt at a cross roads.”³

Any action taken to turn the tide on the decline of the SANDF must be founded on knowledge and understanding of the challenges confronting defence transformation in South Africa. Throughout her book, Heinecken provides us with the necessary foundation to do just that.

The decline of the SANDF is significant because a democratic society and its armed forces are inextricably linked. On the one hand, a democracy is reliant upon defence against aggression from outside (and increasingly in the post-Cold War era, from within). One commentator⁴ recently argued that South Africa’s, “continued and successful existence as a robust democracy and economic powerhouse is intricately dependent on the SANDF”. He continued, “democracy will not defend SA, but democracy has to

be defended by a well-resourced and funded SANDF”. On the other hand, democracy relies on the appropriate control of the military power in the country, thereby regulating the potential for the military to “wreck the fabric of society”.⁵ In its extreme, military action of this nature takes the form of a military coup.

Concerns expressed over defence in the South African democracy have not involved the risk of a military coup. Rather, these concerns have centred on whether those responsible for exercising leadership in the area of defence have enabled the establishment and sustainability of two things: a capable defence force and a civil–military culture that reflects and reinforces democratic principles.

Since the publication of the 2015 Defence Review, commentaries on defence in the South African democracy have largely taken the form of short, albeit valuable, online pieces. Some research findings have been published in academic journals. Book chapters that deserve mention are those authored by Lindy Heinecken (*Reflections on insider-outsider experiences of military research in South Africa*, 2016),⁶ Theo Neethling (*The dilemma relating to the modernisation of the SANDF and its external role*, 2019)⁷ and Jo-Ansie Van Wyk (*The executive and the military in South Africa during the Zuma presidency*, 2019).⁸ Interestingly, each of these authors has spent some time as academics at the Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Military Science, housed at the South African Military Academy.

A relatively small number of individuals have the qualification, experience and insight required to make a meaningful contribution to research on South African military affairs. Additionally, and for reasons that Heinecken outlines in Chapter 4 of her book, interest in researching South Africa’s military affairs has waned. Research in this field however remains to be of vital importance – in the building of healthy civil–military relations, in consolidating South Africa’s democracy, and in assessing the support that the military instrument can offer the state as the latter pursues its regional and continental endeavours.

The need to know what the military can offer as far as South Africa’s foreign policy is concerned, gains impetus to the extent that government aspires to play a continued role in cultivating peace and security in the African continent. This, while – at the same time – making use of its membership of international forums, such as the South African Development Community, the African Union, and the United Nations Security Council.

Professor Heinecken is undoubtedly among the few that are qualified to speak about these spheres of South Africa’s democratic and national interest. The author holds a PhD from the King’s College London Department of War Studies. She is a former researcher and Deputy Director of the Centre for Military Studies (CEMIS) at the South African Military Academy, and she continues to serve as a specialist researcher for the South African Army. Her book is the culmination of thirty years of research on the relationship between armed forces and society.

In the work under review, Heinecken aims to “straddle theory and practice”, “capture the ‘lived experiences’ of soldiers” and “critically reflect on the challenges of

defence transformation, and to point out lessons learnt”.⁹ The significance of ‘defence in a democracy’ underlines the importance of these three tasks.

Defence transformation refers to how the military undergoes the necessary changes following the transition to a “new political dispensation and changed security context”.¹⁰ The analysis of any practice or process – in this case, defence transformation – must happen against the appropriate theoretical background. Heinecken does this, but according to the reviewer, without giving the theory of civil–military relations the necessary priority.

The essential concern that characterises the theory of civil–military relations is how best to exercise civil control of the military. In a democracy, civil control must take the form of democratic control. It is the theory of civil–military relations that allows for an understanding of why South Africa’s civil–military relations under apartheid were problematic and why there existed a need for defence transformation with the advent of South Africa’s democracy.

Defence transformation therefore falls within the wider ambit of civil–military relations. The defence transformation challenges that Heinecken brings to the attention of the reader originate largely from within the interrelationship of “the military, political decision-makers and the host society”.¹¹ Even where challenges originate from outside the civil–military relationship (a new international security environment, for example), successful management and/or resolution of these challenges depends on the quality of a country’s civil–military relations. The defence transformation challenges that Heinecken cites are significant to the extent that they inhibit the capacity of the military to fulfil its function and the realisation of the norms that govern defence in a democracy. These challenges can only be recognised, measured, deliberated, understood and solved with theoretical principles in mind.

The author could have extended her writing on the theories of civil–military relations in Chapter 4 to make for an entire chapter on theory at the beginning of the book. Such an extension could also have included more detail on the notion and practice of security sector reform that characterised other countries, who, like South Africa, were transitioning from intrastate conflict and/or non-democratic governance in the immediate post-Cold War era. The historical overview of South Africa’s political transition and defence transformation, as important as it is, will then have taken second place in the chapter line-up.

For Heinecken, the challenges that have confronted defence transformation in South Africa originate from the three new environments that emanated from the end of the Cold War and the country’s transition from apartheid to democracy. These are a new security environment, a new political environment and a new social and legal environment. These new environments provide the historical-contextual framework for Heinecken’s analysis of defence transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Using David Chuter’s conceptualisation of defence transformation, Heinecken considers how South Africa’s post-apartheid military has adapted to the country’s new environments while undergoing the consequential organisational, political, cultural and human resource transformation.

The ability of the SANDF to adapt to each new environment is assessed in Heinecken's coverage of key issues that have characterised the transformation of South Africa's post-apartheid military. These key issues are reflected in the choice of chapter titles. Heinecken's examination of each issue reveals the extent to which the pursuit of defence transformation has served to either erode or reinforce South Africa's military capability and the norms that govern 'defence in a democracy'. The title of her book is instructive in this regard, as it embodies the essence of her findings.

The processes of democratic transition and military transformation have placed the SANDF on a less than desirable trajectory. This has happened to the point where, if the defence force is to achieve the capability necessary for the fulfilment of its constitutional mandate, it must be 'found' again.

Heinecken not only focuses on South Africa's defence force, however. The author takes a sociological approach, relating her account of the transformational challenges facing South Africa's post-apartheid military to the wider South African society. There is good reason why Jakkie Cilliers, in the foreword to the book, describes Heinecken as, "the ultimate empathetic social scientist".¹²

In her analysis of the SANDF's capacity for effective involvement in peace missions, for example, Heinecken expresses sincere concern over, and does well to capture through interviews, what she refers to as, "the 'lived experiences' of soldiers".¹³ Her concern extends beyond the soldier, to the consequences of these experiences for the military family during and after post-deployment integration.

Heinecken acknowledges that there are aspects of South Africa's defence transformation not included in her volume, but that are important nevertheless. She cites "foreign policy, defence strategy and policy, the armaments industry and professional military education" as examples.¹⁴ These are aspects located beyond the purview of her 30-year-long inquiry into the relationship between armed forces and society. Even with a restricted scope, one would have expected a larger, more in-depth volume from a scholar with Heinecken's experience. However, as the author herself explains, the book is aimed at a wide audience.¹⁵ The length of the book is a deliberate attempt at making knowledge of the challenges confronting defence in South Africa's democracy accessible. Growing awareness of these challenges will help bridge South Africa's ever-widening civil-military gap, "whereby fewer and fewer people are knowledgeable about military matters, consequently weakening civil control, oversight and accountability".¹⁶

In short, Heinecken's book offers the broadest and most comprehensive account that one will find of defence-related issues in South Africa's 25-year-long democratic journey. Military and political leaders will appreciate this work if their intention is to create and maintain a defence capability aligned with constitutional precepts and cultivate civil-military relations that meet with democratic norms. The current trajectory of South Africa's defence force and South Africa's wider civil-military relations must change. Reading Lindy Heinecken's book is an appropriate starting point.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Armed Forces Day 2020: 25 Years of Defence in Democracy”. Republic of South Africa Department of Defence. Date known. <<https://www.facebook.com/events/791467421329534/>>. Accessed on 1 April 2020.
- ² Parliamentary Monitoring Group. “South African Defence Review 2015”. N.d. <<http://pmg-assets.s3-website-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/170512review.pdf>> Accessed on 10 March 2020.
- ³ L Heinecken. *South Africa’s post-apartheid military: Lost in transition and transformation*. Cape Town: UCT Press, 2019, 32.
- ⁴ S Hamilton. “Opinion: SA’s deliberate and predictable underfunding of defence function is a threat to its democracy and economic growth”. *defenceWeb*. 28 February 2020. <<https://www.defenceweb.co.za/sa-defence/sa-defence-sa-defence/opinion-sas-deliberate-and-predictable-underfunding-of-defence-function-is-a-threat-to-its-democracy-and-economic-growth/>> Accessed on 1 March 2020.
- ⁵ SP Huntington. *The soldier and the state: The theory and politics of civil-military relations*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985, 14.
- ⁶ L Heinecken. “Reflections on insider-outsider experiences of military research in South Africa”. In Carreiras, H, Castro, C & Frederic, S (eds), *Researching the military*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- ⁷ T Neethling. “The dilemma relating to the modernisation of the SANDF and its external role”. In Ratuva, S, Compel, R & Aguilar, S (eds), *Guns & roses: Comparative civil-military relations in the changing security environment*. Singapore: Springer Verlag, 2019.
- ⁸ J-A van Wyk. “The executive and the military in South Africa during the Zuma presidency”. In Ratuva *et al. op. cit.*
- ⁹ *South Africa’s post apartheid military op. cit.*, p. 18
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.